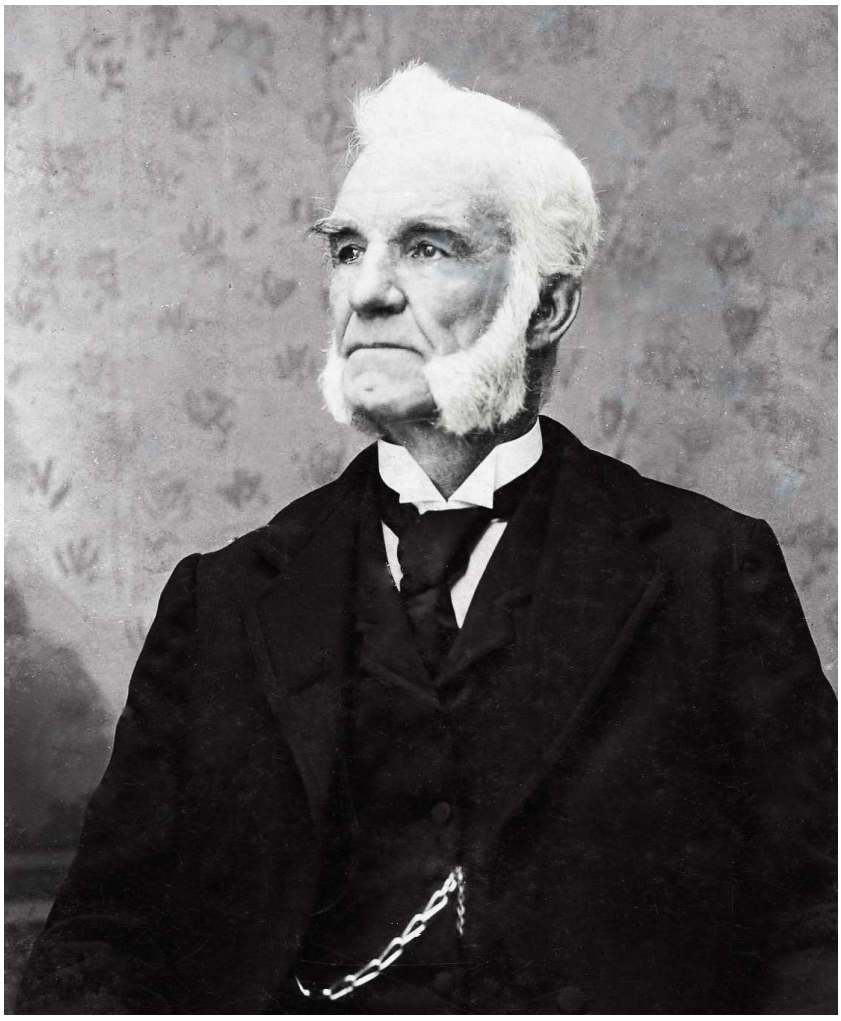
Recollections of an Old Settler



A.S. Vail

A.S. Vail wrote the following story in 1906

Momence is, today, a thriving little City of about three thousand inhabitants, but I can remember very clearly the time when, but a few houses clustered about the bend in the Kankakee. Now, when the city's interests seem to be broadening so rapidly, I enjoy very much to look back upon those times and call to mind a few of the happenings, which, taken altogether, form the varied but interesting history of our home town.

Many years ago, I met an older man who had been a fur trader through this part of the country at the time of the Revolution. He told me, among the Indians, once while he was traveling through this part of the country. It seems that the chief of one tribe has killed a warrior in another.

This caused hard feelings, and on the day which he was telling about the hostile bands, clubs, and various other weapons, they met on the prairie near where I currently reside. One company of braves was drawn up in a straight line opposite the other, and as they were in a mood for fighting, it looked as if a bloody battle would ensue with the possible result of the destruction of all. In the space between the two ranks of Indians stood their respective chiefs talking earnestly together and walking up and down the lines parleying with each other and their tribesmen. At last, two turned back-to-back and stepped off for thirty paces, each suddenly turned about, simultaneously, giving their respective war whoops. At that instant, the chief guilty of the crime threw up his hands, and the other buried an avenging knife in the heart of his warrior's murderer. Thus, the latter gave his life for this tribe because many would have been killed if the two opposing parties had fought. This shows the noble spirit of the Indians who roved these prairies in those almost forgotten years when no white man, but the fur trader was seen from one moon to another.

I came here in November of 1836. Soon after, the few settlers gathered together and decided to call the little town Loraine, but the name was changed to Momence a few years later. However, the Indian name from which it was supposed to be taken was Moness. At that time, for sixteen miles north of the river on Range line, there were no bushes, only burnt prairie. Our nearest neighbors were fifty miles away in Chicago. I was the first postmaster and built the first frame schoolhouse in Kankakee County. My sister-in-law, Loraine Beebe, was the teacher. It then cost twenty-five cents to send a letter from the East and two cents for a newspaper.

Loraine Beebe

The chief of the Pottawatomie Indians, White Pigeon, had his wigwam a few miles up the river.
When told that his excessive use of "fire-water" grieved the Great Spirit, he promptly replied in an earnest manner: "White man no make um, Indian no drink um."

As far as can be ascertained, the first Fourth of July celebration in this state was held here in 1837. Everyone came from miles around, even from Chicago, and in all, a company of about sixty-one assembled. The orator was a man visiting here from the state of Vermont. Another number on the program was the rendition of "Brutus and Cassius" by Newel Beebe and Charles Thatcher. This strongly affected the audience, many of them convinced it was meant in real earnest.

Chief White Pigeon

About forty years ago, while hunting bees in the sand-ridges south of town, a company of men discovered three men making counterfeit silver money in a small shanty in the midst of a poplar grove. The following morning the bee chasers came back to arrest them, but the shack was burned, and the men had disappeared. Although it was not known at that time, the counterfeiters were supplied with food by a neighboring farmer named Van Rankins, and these supplies were carried back and forth by the latter's hired man. Soon after this, while going overland from the south to Chicago, a man and boy took dinner with Van Rankins. The farmer admired the traveler's silver-mounted rifle very much but did not wish to pay the thirty dollars that was asked for it. But after the man had left, Van Rankins sent his hired man after the rifle with the required price in bills. But when this money was examined, it was found to be all counterfeit. The proper authorities were notified, and the guilty parties were caught and brought to town. Then the hired man turned state's evidence and revealed that the counterfeiters who had been seen at work before were now on an island in Beaver Lake. A party at once went there and seized and brought them to Momence. As they have been engaged in this unlawful business in the state of Indiana, they were taken there, tried, found guilty, and put in jail. Since that time, the island in Beaver Lake has been known as Bogus Island.

A.S Vails Fishing Cabin. A.S. Vail is standing in the far back left

About the time I came to what is now called the city of Momence, I happened to be walking down the river when I saw a log up in the fork of a large tree. It was a surprise to me how it came to be up there, so I asked Joe Barber, a half-blood Indian, who told me that an Indian lay buried in it.

According to the custom of these men, a tree about six feet long was split in two, and each half hollowed out. The body was then placed in the log, and the two halves fastened together with withes and peeled bark. Then this log of which I am speaking was placed in a tree leaning over the banks of the Kankakee. It remained there for five or six years when the withes began to break, and finally, it fell into the river. That same tree in which this log was placed is still standing.

These are but a few of the connecting links in the history of Momence which I have been fortunate enough to see forged, but space forbids that I should write further.

Credits: Momence High School Yearbook 1906- 1907/ Kevin McNulty / Graham Historic House / Nancy Porter

A.S. Vail's Cabin Along the Kankakee River. Vail is standing in the far back left.